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UM to create department of corrections training

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UNIVERSITY RELATIONS • MISSOULA, MT 59812 • 406-243-2522 • FAX: 406-243-4520

NEWS RELEASE

Oct. 30, 2006

Contact: Tim Conley, UM social work assistant professor, 406-243-5557, timothy.conley@umontana.edu.

UM TO CREATE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS TRAINING

MISSOULA —

Montana's parole and probation officers deal with a diverse group of offenders who are increasingly mentally ill, chemically dependent and sexually violent.

In order to meet the demands of this offender population, the Adult Community Corrections Division of the state Department of Corrections has hired The University of Montana to design an online training program to assist its officers in dealing with these difficult cases.

"This training is absolutely needed," said Tim Conley, the assistant professor in UM's School of Social Work who spearheads the project. "We recently reported to corrections that 48 percent of offenders in the prerelease centers have a mental illness diagnosis and 93 percent have a substance-abuse diagnosis. And parole or probation is their next step from there."

Conley said the new curriculum will cost the state between \$102,000 and \$118,000, depending on how many employees actually log on to take the Web-based courses. He and his colleagues will design four training modules -- each 16 hours long -- that address mental illness, chemical dependency, diversity and sexually violent offenders.

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Conley, who has developed professional training courses for 20 years, expects to offer the first module this winter, and the rest will be completed before June 30, 2007.

But first he and Eva Farrington, a UM research assistant and social work undergraduate, will survey the state's parole, probation and prerelease center employees to learn their existing level of knowledge. The training will be tailored to fit the needs of the probation and parole officers, taking into account what they already know.

"That's sort of an empowerment model of social work applied to training development, because they are empowered to tell us what they need to know," Conley said. "They know what they need a lot better than we do."

The Web-based training will be offered through UM Continuing Education, which has a wide variety of online course offerings. Conley said the project should save taxpayer dollars because officers won't have to travel to other cities and stay in hotels for training as they do now. Also, this means department's training dollars will be spent in Montana, rather than on out-of-state training courses.

The program will impact parole and probation officers working throughout Montana.

"This is a real collaboration of Montana resources between the department and The University of Montana to develop a program that benefits our officers, offenders and the general public," said Pam Bunke, administrator of the Adult Community Corrections Division. "This will improve our officers' abilities to work with this difficult population of offenders."

Conley said working with parole and probation officers is something of a new twist for him.

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"I'm an addiction specialist," he said, "and when I came to Montana, I said, 'All right, where are all the addicts?' And 93 percent of the prerelease population is addicted. I found my addicts, and now I want to keep the workforce that works with them well trained. It's my professional mission."

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